Chapter 2


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Introduction

This chapter analyzes the leadership style of Malawi’s founding head of state, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, from 1964 to 1994. The major focus is on Dr Banda’s autocratic rule, his choice of international allies, and how these processes were very much influenced by the cold war. By analyzing the president’s public statements and his choice of international allies, I show that since the president was pro-Western, he favored the establishment of diplomatic relations with countries that had capitalist values, sometimes against the resolutions of the African Union and the United Nations Organization. Dr Banda’s government established diplomatic relations with Apartheid South Africa, Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique), and the Republic of China (ROC), and in spite of these controversial decisions, he continued to enjoy the support of the Western powers because of his strong anticommunist standing. Due to his ideological stand, the West tolerated and worked with the Banda regime despite its appalling human rights record. It was only in the aftermath of the cold war that the Western powers, no longer in need of Third World allies, began to pressurize the Malawi government to open up its political and economic system.

Malawi’s independence from seven decades of British rule in July 1964 took place in an atmosphere of international politics where both the Western and Eastern blocs were looking for
allies in the ongoing cold war. The leading nationalist party in the fight for independence was the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC), which was formed in 1944. In the late 1950s, as the party became more influential, the colonial government began to be suspicious that the party had communist infiltrations and used this as a pretext to declare a state of emergency and subsequently ban the party in March 1959. The colonial government described NAC leaders such as Henry Masauko Chipembere, Dunduzu Chisiza, Kanyama Chiume, and Dr Banda as communist extremists who had to be silenced.¹ However, as I illustrate in subsequent sections of this chapter, these fears were unfounded, as Malawi’s postcolonial government, under the leadership of Dr Banda, adopted the pro-Western capitalist system. Such a move influenced the choices Malawi made in establishing diplomatic relations with other countries.

Dr Banda’s foreign policy formulation and implementation could best be explained by the rational actor model. According to Stephen Chan (1992), the rational actor model of foreign policy formulation and implementation considers states and their leaders as unitary and rational actors in decision making after thorough calculations to respond to strategic problems.² This model has its roots in human psychology and is based on a number of assumptions, including the following: that the actor pursues goals that reflect their perceived self-interest; the goals being pursued follow the actor’s conscious choice; that the individual is the basic agent in society; if given options, the actor will choose the alternative with the highest expected utility; and lastly, that the actor possesses extensive information on both the available alternatives and the likely consequences of their choices.³ It was very clear from Banda’s statements and actions that he took advantage of cold war developments to pursue his own personal interests and the interests of Malawi as he understood them.


Dr Banda ruled Malawi for three decades, from July 1964 to May 1994. Unlike most of his fellow African leaders of the time, who either took a neutral position or adopted socialist